A case study of an employment training program for students with disabilities aged 18–21: Strengths, barriers, and suggestions for improvement

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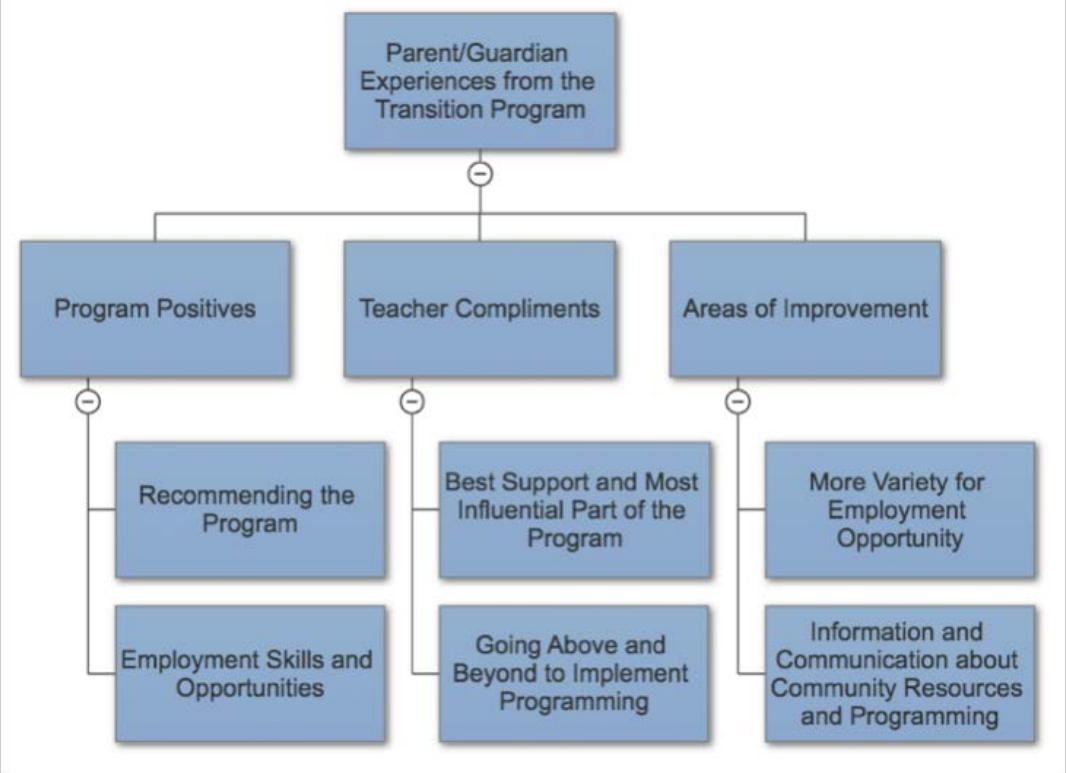

Abstract

People with disabilities, across all age groups, are much less likely to be employed than those without a disability (Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Mourssi-Asfash, 2013; Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2016). Historically, people with disabilities have been regarded as lesser human beings in the medical and social community. These views are social constructs (ableism and othering) that negatively impact the access to employment and job retention of people with disabilities. However, transition programs (for students with disabilities aged 18–21) in school districts are available to teach individuals with disabilities employment skills to expand employment rates and retention, thus increasing independence and contribution to self and society. One particular transition program has been successful for individuals with disabilities to become employed. This study aims to explore and understand how the program is successfully training individuals with disabilities to improve access to and retention of employment, as well as the drawbacks and next steps of the program. The participants in this case study were parents/guardians of individuals with disabilities who recently graduated from this transition program (in the past 2 years). Parents/guardians were interviewed about their personal experiences with the transition program, focusing in particular on employment training. The findings include: (a) teacher care, advocacy, and emphasizing success; (b) program positives, specifically the employment variety and the skills learned at those jobs and recommendation of the program to upcoming students and parents/guardians based on their employment experiences, support and advocacy from teachers, and genuine care from the teachers and staff from the program; and (c) areas of improvement including

more variety and quantity of employment opportunities and communication about information regarding government resources and programming. Recommended improvement strategies for the program include: (a) develop peer support groups for parents/guardians and students; (b) have key people in the program to having a list of resources available to parents from the government agencies; (c) train students and parents/guardians to be better advocates; (d) have tangible copies of frequently asked questions and answers from parents, guardians, and students readily available at IEP meetings; (e) have a vocational rehabilitation service representative at every IEP meeting and, if this is not possible, have information that the representative would like to provide based on the individual's' needs; (f) create a website with transitional guidelines to adulthood that parents/guardians and students could complete during their time with the transition program; (g) have a representative from the transition program working within the community and surrounding communities to build relationships for future job placements; (h) educate companies and employers about the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities; and (i) continue the philosophy and culture of care, advocacy, and support for students and parents/guardians through the hiring process and a culture/climate committee.

*Keywords***:** transition, transition programs, special education, education, ableism, othering, employment, discrimination, disability, special education law, disability law

Introduction

Employment rates of individuals with disabilities compared to non-disabled persons vary from study to study and state to state. The Annual Disability Status Report, as completed and analyzed by Cornell University, is released each year based on data from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). This is based on a survey sent to a random sample of over 3.5 million households (Erickson, et al., 2016). Cornell University has public records analyzing each years' data from 2008 to 2015. After analysis, data from the Annual Disability Status Report from years 2008 to 2015 shows people with disabilities having a significant lower employment rate than non-disabled people. From 2008 to 2015, people with disabilities were 40.4 - 43.1 percentage points below the employment rate of people without disabilities. This data incorporates non-institutionalized individuals in the working ages between 21 and 64 (Erickson et al. 2016). Between the years 2008 and 2015 from the Annual Disability Status Report, 2011 had the lowest employment rate of individuals with disabilities (2010 was the lowest employment rate of non-disabled people). This low employment rate was also reflected in Minnesota's employment rate of individuals with disabilities. According to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, which also analyzed data from the ACS, individuals with disabilities dropped out of the workforce during the 2011 recession five times faster than non-disabled people. Mourssi-Asfash (2013) explains, "According to the 2011 ACS, only 33.4 percent of working age people with disabilities were in the workforce and only about 27.6 percent were actually working. In other words, 6,298,772 of 18,858,600 men and women with a disability in the United

States were employed." Minnesota was second highest (after North Dakota) in employing individuals with disabilities during this time (at 47%), but when compared to 81.8% of non-disabled Americans, the state's average is far lower. This data indicates a disparity between individuals with disabilities and individuals without disabilities. This calls into question whether or not individuals with disabilities are being appropriately trained for the workforce through the education system or if employers are not hiring individuals with disabilities based on discrimination.

Previous research in the area of disability includes employment statistics, social constructs of ableism and othering, social role valorization and normalization theories, people first movement, anti-discrimination laws, inclusion laws, teaching strategies and practices for students with disabilities in K-12 education, and transition education which focuses on teaching skills specifically in the areas of employment, independent living, and postsecondary education. All of the previous work completed in the realm of disability helps us further understand disability historically, societal perceptions of people with disabilities, and interventions intended to increase access and to level the playing field.

The hypothesis that gave rise to this study is that the transition programs available for students with disabilities in Minnesota are successful in teaching the areas of transition, especially in the area of employment; however, there is room for improvement given recent statistics from Mourssi-Asfash (2013). The objective of this study is to link historical perspectives, disability as a social construct (ableism and othering), education and employment law with disability and discrimination, transition programs, and a

specific transition program in the state of Minnesota to experiences of parents/guardians of students who successfully completed a transition program.

My research design and hypothesis link employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities to historical events, societal constructs, discrimination, and educational programs. These statistics and ideas go hand in hand with the realities individuals with disabilities face when they go through the K-12 education system and enter the workforce. The theoretical and practical implications of this study will further our understanding of transition programs (strengths and areas for improvement) along with the next steps required for improving employment rates and retention of individuals with disabilities, specifically within this transition program.

Historical Perspectives and Disability as a Social Construct

Disability is one of many social constructs that heavily intersects with other non-normative and marginalized groups of individuals. Historically speaking, disability has gone through vast re-definitions to try to encompass its characteristics. Samuel Gridley Howe, a medical doctor from Massachusetts in the mid 1800's, initially started to classify individuals with disabilities. As cited in his paper "On the Causes of Idiocy" (1858), "for all humane and practical purposes, we may divide them into pure idiots, fools, simpletons, and imbeciles" (p. 5). What makes his paper so abhorrent is how the vernacular is currently understood. Current vernacular would assume he is demonstrating extreme disrespect for individuals with a disability, but this vocabulary did not always have negative connotations. Dr. Howe was using medically relevant vernacular of his time to describe individuals with disabilities. However, previous (and arguably current)

society has regarded individuals with disabilities as inferior beings (whether intentionally or not), which in turn changed the classifications by Dr. Howe into insults and derogatory terms. Further into his paper, Dr. Howe describes maximum idiocy as an individual "with minimal intelligence" and states "very few individuals can be found in which a being in human shape is so much below even insects and so little above a sensitive plant" (p. 5). Even though his previous word choice had different definitions in the past, it appears that Dr. Howe unintentionally used microaggressions towards individuals with disabilities by comparing them to non-human living beings that are not highly regarded. Later, he describes the individual's gross motor, fine motor, and communicative skills in medical fashion, which would have been appropriate for the time (unable to roll over when placed on a rug, unable to communicate when he/she is hungry, etc.), but the comparison to insects and plants dehumanized the medical and scientific side of his observations and assertions, further degrading individuals who fit into this category.

Language

When Dr. Howe used the terms idiots, fools, simpletons, and imbeciles, he was using current medical vocabulary that was relevant to that time. The term "idiot" derives from the Greek language and was used to describe individuals who needed 24-hour care. "Imbecile" is a French term derived from Latin and means "without support." It was intended for individuals who were physically weak. However, just like Dr. Howe's possible unintentional microaggressions and comparisons of individuals with disabilities to insects, the definitions of these words eventually suggested inferiority because of how

people viewed individuals with disabilities, especially when they are uttered by an able-bodied person (privilege).

Another term used previously was “mongolism” or “mongoloid,” with reference to the Mongolian people of East Asia, to identify someone with Down’s syndrome. Reynolds, Zupanick and Dombeck (2015) explained that “for obvious reasons, the Mongolian People's Republic objected to this use. They requested that the medical community cease the use of this term. Their request was granted in the 1960’s and the World Health Organization agreed that the term should no longer be used within the medical community” (2013). Originally, these terms were adjectives or medical terminology, and they eventually turned into negative descriptors of individuals with special needs.

As time goes on, history continues to repeat itself. The word “retarded” was a medical term that was used until 2013 to describe an individual with a disability. In 2013, the Federal Register, a daily journal of the United States Government, changed the terminology from “mental retardation” to “intellectual disability.” The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (DSM-5) is a classification and diagnostic tool used by healthcare professionals (American Psychiatric Association, 2017). It is used in the United States and across much of the world as an authoritative guide to defining mental disorders. It also provides common language for healthcare professionals to use when communicating with patients and families. The DSM 5th edition took nearly ten years to revise with research and peer-reviewed journals from nearly 160 world-renowned researchers and clinicians across the world. Experts in the

areas of neuroscience, biology, genetics, statistics, epidemiology, social and behavioral sciences, nosology, and public health also voluntarily contributed to the revisions, making it a truly encompassing manual (American Psychological Association, 2013). In the DSM-5, they also have revised the term “mental retardation” to “intellectual disability.” According to the DSM-5, “the significant changes address what the disorder is called, its impact on a person’s functioning, and criteria improvements to encourage more comprehensive patient assessment.”

Even though the word “retarded” has been removed from the medical community, it is still used in layman's terms among people, mostly with the intent to hurt the individuals they are describing or talking to. Through personal experiences and observations, it seems as though the word “retarded” has been more focused on non-disabled individuals who are not meeting social standards and is not meant to degrade people with disabilities. However, with the historical relevance of the word and its prior meaning, it can still be hurtful and used as a way to demean individuals with disabilities. A disabilities advocacy group with a website promoting the cessation of the use of the word “retarded” (this group refers to it as “the r-word”) has personal thoughts and testimonies from advocates and individuals who identify with having a disability about how the word personally feels when it is used in a negative fashion. Their slogan is “r-word: spread the word to end the word” (The Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation for the Benefit of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities, 2017). Joseph Franklin Stevens is a Special Olympics Virginia athlete and a global advocate. As stated on the “Why Pledge” section of the advocacy website, he describes how he feels the vernacular impacts him:

> What's wrong with "retard"? I can only tell you what it means to me and people like me when we hear it. It means that the rest of you are excluding us from your group. We are something that is not like you and something that none of you would ever want to be. We are something outside the "in" group. We are someone that is not your kind. I want you to know that it hurts to be left out here, alone.

Joseph Steven's feelings seem to be describing a social construct, "othering" where by using the "r-word" the dichotomy of "us" versus "them" is created, which perpetuates the privilege of non-disabled persons who use the word.

Late 1800s and Early 1990s: United States

Evans (1983) wrote (as stated in Covey, 1998), "throughout history, it was widely held that a retarded and insane person could, because of their 'animal nature,' withstand physical hardships such as extremes of temperature that would kill a normal person." This is a rationalization of the treatment of people with disabilities who were regarded as subhuman, evil, being worth of pity and charity, scapegoats, entertaining, and poor and beggars (Covey, 1998). These perceptions of people with disabilities, along with having a mental illness, placed them in the living corridors of asylums and mental institutions. Here, medical procedures were performed on the "patients" in the facilities.

Sterilization, or eugenics, was a common practice or "remedy" in the late 1800s and early 1900s of people with disabilities who resided in institutions and asylums (Pfeiffer, 1994). Also, an increase in population of people with a mental or intellectual disability gave rise to the eugenics movement, with "scientific inquiry" being used as propaganda campaigns (Albrecht, Seelman, & Bury, 2001). Thirty-three states by 1930

had involuntary sterilization laws in place; however, three states (New Jersey, New York, and Indiana) had the laws struck down during that time as unconstitutional (Pfeiffer, 1994) even though Indiana was the first with this law. Buck v. Bell was a pivotal case in which Carrie Buck, considered to be "feebleminded," was in a mental institution; Virginia law allowed the medical doctors to perform sexual sterilization procedures for the "health of the patient and the welfare of society" (Buck, 1927). They found this statute did not violate the constitution because they were not questioning the medical procedure, rather the process of substantive law. "Three generations of imbeciles are enough" was stated along with the verdict by Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr in May, 1927. The court ruling still stands today (Lo, 2016).

1940s and 1950s in Minnesota

Minnesota had mental institutions in the 1940s and 1950s that housed people with disabilities. In 1948, a news reporter, Geri Joseph, wrote multiple articles in the Minneapolis Morning Tribune on the conditions of the state mental institutions that included extreme overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, inedible food, over-reliance on restraints, and severe understaffing (The Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017). Dr. Ralph Rossen was appointed as the first commissioner of mental health and hospitals. He brought a new philosophy to the system of unique needs and individual attention, which seemed unattainable at the time due to staffing. The understaffing was approximately seventy-five to one hundred patients per one staff member, and one of the new initiatives was each resident should receive five

minutes of individual attention during an eight-hour shift (The Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017).

According to the Minnesota Governors Council on Developmental Disabilities (2017) the Arc (Association for Retarded Children) was a prominent parent organization for people with disabilities that was created in 1946 and gained momentum in the 1950s. This now nationally recognized advocacy group advocates for all people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families and is a premier provider of the supports and services people want and need (The Arc, 2016). The first national convention was in Minneapolis in 1950 and Governor Youngdahl thought people with developmental disabilities had the right to live with a family, go to school, reach maximum potential, be happy, play, have companionship and respect, develop, and receive love and affection. "Despite these advances, the current "medical model" of institutions for treatment continued to prevail" (Minnesota Governors Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017). It wasn't until 1956 that the legislature agreed that every child has an equal right to education with other children. Special education classes were required for any child with any IQ (Minnesota Governors Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017).

1960s and 1970s in Minnesota

In the early 1960s, institutions still existed and were at an all-time high for population (Minnesota Governors Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017). Dr. David Vail worked with Miriam Karlins, a former official in the Department of Public Welfare to combat dehumanizing practices that were previously used in institutions (Minnesota Governors Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017). Thoughts about

individuals with disabilities were starting to be questioned through the Arc and the Department of Public Welfare. People could define an intellectual disability (at that time referred to as mental retardation) but didn't know much more than that. People also believed they should live normal lives but believed they should not vote or drink (Minnesota Governors Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017). In 1965, the financial burden on guardians of people with disabilities was significant if they were not in a hospital due to funding only being provided to those in a hospital. The public pressured the state to provide funding for families who are using private service as well. This filtered into the Title 1 grant of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1967 with the theory that children with disabilities could develop life skills and become self-sufficient if given appropriate attention (Minnesota Governors Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017). Companies started to embrace individuals with disabilities in Minnesota, including Economics Laboratory (currently known as Ecolab) for employment to teach them viable skills, with American Express, Lutheran Brotherhood, Radisson Hotels, and McDonald's close behind (Minnesota Governors Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017).

In the 1970s, phasing out institutions in the next two decades became a discussion point. Revamping the current hospitals to meet the needs of patients and to house patients closer to their homes were of significant importance (Minnesota Governors Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017). Along with moving people closer to their home communities was the desire for independent living. Bowe (1978) states (as cited in Albrecht et al., 2001) "the independent living movement embraced the notion that the

barriers that confront people with disabilities are less related to individual impairment than to social attitudes, interpretations of disability, architectural barriers, legal barriers, and educational barriers."

More research was also being done in special education through the University of Minnesota, which resulted in an understanding of self-injurious behavior resulting from boredom, teasing, abuse, dissatisfaction, and forced attitudes (Minnesota Governors Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017). Minnesota was the first state approved to use Medical Assistance through federal funds in 1971. In 1972, care standards in institutions were challenged by Richard Welsh when he filed a complaint with the federal courts about the regional treatment centers because they did not meet the constitutional standards of due process. Media was another ally in the court case and Welsh ended up winning the case in 1974 through overwhelming evidence that individuals with disabilities are capable of growth and development when treated properly and with increased staffing. Community facilities went from twelve in 1970 to 200 in 1978. In 1975, the Education for Handicapped Children Act was signed and implemented in education supporting students with disabilities in the classroom (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017).

1980s, 1990s, and Current

1981 is designated by the United Nations as the "International Year of Disabled Persons" (Fleischer & Zames, 2001) which could be credited to the "People First" movement that evolved from previous civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Minnesota Governors Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017). The movement

included an increase in self-advocacy groups giving people with developmental disabilities an opportunity to speak and be heard. Also in 1981, Congress passed the Omnibus Reconciliation Act which allows "states to apply for three year waivers so that Medicaid could pay for services provided in people's homes" (Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017). This is considered the largest funding stream for individuals with developmental disabilities. Further in this waiver in 1983 and 1984, funding was approved for Medicaid to pay for individuals to move from state institutions to local group homes and prevent them from any movement into institutions (Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017). In 1990, George Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act. "For the first time, citizens with broad-based disabilities, developmental and otherwise, had national legislation that protected their rights as individuals. It also forced employers, educators, landlords, builders and other service providers to improve access and opportunities to all citizens regardless of their abilities" (Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2017). In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (formerly Education for All Handicapped Children Act) included changes to increase transition needs in the areas of employment, independent living, and postsecondary education (United States Department of Education, 2017).

Ableism, Othering, and Social Role Valorization

"Inspired by the 1960s civil rights struggle and the 1970s Independent Living Movement, self-advocacy fostered independent living and employment for people with developmental disabilities" (Fleischer & Zames, 2001). Self-advocacy of individuals with

disabilities grew through people first language (stating the person first before the disability in spoken and written language) movement and through the National Group Self Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE) (Fleischer & Zames, 2001). This advocacy group, along with many others (the Arc, PACER, DRA, TASH, etc.) are operational and thriving today. Through advocacy and acknowledgement of the discrimination of people with disabilities come theories of social constructs to describe how people with disabilities, in general, are viewed in society.

Ableism describes the social construct that has evolved through historical language and perceptions, creating a power struggle in society that gives able-bodied people more privilege. Our society and how it functions has been built around able-bodied individuals and is a form of discrimination in favor of able-bodied people. This form of discrimination is hurtful to individuals who are seen as having a disability, and those who are seen as non-disabled can be chastised for functioning in the socially constructed levels of being disabled (needing assistance with finances, living independently, retaining employment, etc.). According to Mike Oliver (2004), the social model of disability was first described by the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in the publication of The Fundamental Principles of Disability. It describes how the main cause of social exclusion is not impairment, but how society responds to people with impairments (Oliver, 2004, p. 19). “Disability is often described in a way that suggests that it is a permanent state; but…linkages between impairment, functional limitation, and disability have so many parameters that we cannot consider disability to be fixed or given” (Barnartt, 2010). People may be labeled as disabled when

they do not view themselves as such. Given a micro level of analysis, a "person does not have one personality, one role, or one identity, but rather many, which fit the situations and the participants in those situations" (Barnartt, 2010). Given any situation, gender, race, socioeconomic status, or age may be salient (Barnartt, 2010). When given a macro level of analysis, "social structures and roles within which the participants are interacting, the cultures from which the participants come, and the historical backgrounds of those cultures" (Barnartt, 2010) are considered. Society as a whole discerns differences in bodies and minds as negatives, which ultimately creates the dichotomy of "us" versus "them," sometimes referred to as "othering." Fine (1994) argued (as stated in Schwalbe et al., 2000) "the term "othering" has come to refer to the process whereby a dominant group defines into existence an inferior group." Disability exists in society as the inferior group where the members are seen as inferior to able-bodied individuals. Most people strive for a quality of life that includes physical well-being, financial independence, social relationships, and participation in recreational and personal activities.

"Social role valorization (SRV) is the name given to a concept for transacting human relationships and human service, formulated in 1983 by Wolf Wolfensberger, Ph.D., as the successor to his earlier formulation of the principle of normalization" (Osburn, 2006). The general concept of SRV is about societal roles that people play and the value that is given to them. If a socially valued role is given to a person, they are more likely to experience positive things in life (speaking in probabilistic terms). Devalued individuals are more likely to have negative experiences in their life. Being put into devalued roles in society can have damaging and lasting effects in a persons' life. In

other words, the goal would be to increase the number of socially valued roles in society and decrease the number of devalued roles in society. Because of these damaging effects that could happen based on being in a devalued position, “SRV is primarily a response to the historically universal phenomenon of social devaluation, and especially societal devaluation” (Osburn, 2006). With ableism and othering occurring in society, SRV is a framework and a concept that is *descriptive* and not *prescriptive*. The framework is often misconstrued to be a practice instead of a theory. One criticism of SRV is when it is viewed as a prescription to fix social constructs at play such as ableism and othering; another criticism of SRV is in an attempt to implement, it imposes “white middle class values” onto individuals who may not want what is considered valued (Wolfensberger, Thomas, Caruso, 1996). However, “SRV is not a value system or ideology, nor does it prescribe or dictate value decisions” (Osburn, 2006). SRV gives people a way to think about how they subconsciously view others, a guide for our thoughts to combat ableism and othering.

Having a disability impacts the quality of life people will have based on the societal constructs that have been placed upon them. The first point of impact of inferiority with disability starts early in one’s life, with education. From there the effects branch out based on the type of education you received with various types of accommodations, modifications, classroom settings, support, etc. The impact of the identified disability continues into employment in regards to applications, access, maintenance, and promotion.

Education and Employment Laws: Disability and Discrimination

With this understanding that disability has been viewed as a disadvantage throughout history, the government has tried to remedy the cultural perception of it by enacting laws in the education and employment systems with the intent of leveling the playing field and providing equal access.

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) was a landmark case for civil rights for African American students finding separate schools are not equal. This specific case was for racial differences, but once started, it opened the floodgates for people with disabilities and lawsuits for separating people with disabilities from their general education peers (Wright & Wright, 2017). Landmark court cases advanced the education of people with disabilities in the 1970s.

> The Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth (1971) and Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia (1972) established the responsibility of states and localities to educate children with disabilities. Thus, the right of every child with a disability to be educated is grounded in the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution (United States Department of Education, 2017).

An influential legislature for students with disabilities is the Education for Handicapped Children Act (EHA). It was created in 1975 and had specific language protecting their educational rights: “A free and public education, due process, nondiscriminatory assessment, and an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for every child. It also stipulated that as much as possible educational services should be provided in the least restrictive

environment" (Keogh, 2007). An IEP is a legal document that is written by a special education teacher with input from the parent, general education teacher, special education teacher, an administrator or representative to the public agency, a related service provider, and the student (when appropriate). This is determined by the educational evaluation that involves the same team members which determines the disability. The IEP is written after a special education evaluation is completed. Students can be identified with a disability from this evaluation resulting in qualification for special education under a disability category. In the state of Minnesota, the disability categories are: autism spectrum disorder, blind-visually impaired, deaf-blind, deaf and hard of hearing, developmental cognitive disability, developmental delay, emotional or behavioral disorder, other health disabilities, physically impaired, severely multiply impaired, specific learning disabilities, speech and language disability, or traumatic brain injury (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017).

Accommodations and modifications are a section of the IEP. They are created by the IEP team and listed for teachers and staff to follow in order for the student to meet academic and functional goals and to make progress with their same-aged peers. Accommodations are methods that change how the classroom material is presented, while modifications are methods that change what material is presented to the student

> Modifications can make school less of a struggle for students, including kids with learning and attention issues. The result of modifications can be that a student learns less than his/her peers. The student might fall behind on important skills. Over time, this can put a student at a big disadvantage (Understood, 2017).

Because the student may fall behind on important skills over time with modifications, this could impact their transition to adulthood after high school, namely post-secondary education and training, employment, and independent living. Because of this possibility of falling behind on important skills, it is important to consider what is *needed* for accommodations and modifications to be successful in the classroom and what are *wanted* to make education easier for students to get better grades with less effort when it is not necessary (therefore not mastering the content according to state standards) and making the student less accountable for the content.

Between 1975 to 1997, multiple amendments were made to the legislature including the name change to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990. These changes added more services, rights, and access for individuals with disabilities. Specifically, it provides free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to people with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE); it ensures that all children with an identified disability receive special education and related services to address their individual needs, be prepared for employment and independent living, that the rights of the children with disabilities and the parents/guardians are protected under law, assures and ensures the efforts of institutions providing services to persons with disabilities, and provides assistance to states, localities, federal agencies, and educational service agencies in providing for the education of children with disabilities (Washington University, 2017). This is the basis for much of special education teaching and practice.

Kohler and Field (2003) describe the significant amendments made to EHA in 1983 and to IDEA in 1990 and 1997 for students with disabilities related to transition

services. In 1983, the federal government authorized spending specifically for transition-focused research and model demonstration grants and contracts. In 1990, federal government support included students' interests, preferences, and needs when considering their transition services. In 1997, the federal government support started to address students' transitional needs at the age of 14 in the IEP.

In 2004, another amendment was made to IDEA, including another name change to make it the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) (Rehfeld, Clark, & Lee, 2012). In section 1400(d) "the phrase "further education" and the emphasis on effective transition services is new. Section 1400(c)(14) describes the need to provide "effective transition services to promote successful post-school employment and/or education" (Wright & Wright, 2017). Congress also made changes to the legal term "transition" in 2004 in IDEA

> The term "transition services" means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that (A) is designed to be a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; (B) is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests; and (C) includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives,

> and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation (Wright & Wright, 2017).

The most recent update to IDEIA was through Every Student Succeeds Act in December 2015. In the law, Congress states

> Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities (United States Department of Education, 2017).

ESSA, the revision of No Child Left Behind in 2001 (United States Department of Education, 2017), was needed when NCLB was found to be unmanageable for educators and districts to maintain. ESSA upholds critical protection for disadvantaged and high needs students and all students be taught to high academic standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), which is vital for increasing the amount of material learned. Students tend to meet expectations when given expectations, and when the bar is set higher, their achievements tend to be be higher.

Other laws that have been passed and implemented to protect individuals with disabilities in the realm of employment are the Rehabilitation Act in 1973, the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act (VEVRAA) in 1974, the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) in 1978, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, and

the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014 (United States Department of Labor, 2010). The Rehabilitation Act

> "authorizes funding for various disability-related purposes and activities, including state vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs, independent living programs, training and research, and the work of the National Council on Disability. It also includes three sections that prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities by specific types of employers: federal agencies, employers/businesses contracting with federal agencies and programs receiving federal financial assistance" (United States Department of Labor, 2010).

The VEVRAA

> "requires employers that have federal contracts or subcontracts entered into before December 1, 2003 of $25,000 or more and/or federal contracts or subcontracts entered into on or after December 1, 2003 of $100,000 or more to provide equal employment opportunities for certain veterans with disabilities.
>
> VEVRAA's Section 4212 specifically prohibits discrimination against covered veterans with disabilities in the full range of employment activities" (United States Department of Labor, 2010).

The CSRA "which covers most federal agencies, contains several rules designed to promote fairness in federal personnel actions and prohibit discrimination against applicants and employees with disabilities" (United States Department of Labor, 2010).

The ADA "prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities and guarantees equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities in employment,

transportation, public accommodations, state and local government services, and telecommunications (United States Department of Labor, 2010). This act has two subsections that relate specifically to employment: Title I and Title II. Title 1 **"**prohibits covered employers from discriminating against people with disabilities in all employment-related activities, including hiring, pay, benefits, firing and promotions" (United States Department of Labor, 2010). Title II "protects people with disabilities from discrimination in state and local government services, programs and activities. It prohibits *all* state and local government entities, regardless of how many people they employ or whether they receive federal financial assistance, from discriminating against qualified individuals with disabilities in employment" (United States Department of Labor, 2010). The WIOA "consolidates federal job training and employment programs, bringing together a wide range of employment services, vocational rehabilitation, adult education, welfare-to-work and vocational education activities into a nationwide system of One-Stop Career Centers (United States Department of Labor, 2010).

Significant steps through legislature have been taken to provide equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities; even as recently as three years ago, laws are still being passed to continue to level the playing field and to provide access. All of these laws are in place to prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities in the areas of employment and the job application process. IDEIA and ESSA protect children from discrimination in the classroom to provide a free and appropriate education to prepare them for independence and employment skills, while the ADA, Rehabilitation Act, WIOA, VEVRAA, and CSRA are in place to prevent discrimination while applying

for a job and while in the workplace. But are they preventing discrimination and increasing access to employment for people with disabilities? Research from the National Center for Special Education Research (2011) indicates otherwise.

The National Center for Special Education Research (2011) completed a longitudinal study looking at the post-high school outcomes of adults with disabilities up to 6 years after graduation. According to the National Center for Special Education Research (2011), individuals who identified as having a disability and individuals who identified as non-disabled were both employed at a rate of 71%. However, the rate of hourly pay was reportedly different by $3.80 per hour (individuals with disabilities were paid on average $9.40 and non-disabled peers individuals were paid on average $13.20 in the same job). This statistic calls to question whether discrimination is still happening based on the differences of hourly wages in the same job between people with disabilities and non-disabled people. Russell (2002) asserts,

> In the US it is now evident that disability civil rights do not equate with a lowering of the disabled unemployment rate. Despite a growing economy—the best possible scenario for increasing the employment of disabled persons—and a low aggregate national official unemployment rate (4–5%) presiding over much of the 9 years the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) employment provisions have been in effect, the unemployment rate for working-age disabled population has barely budged from its chronic state.

Transition Programs in the Education System Focusing on Life After School

The first generation of vocational reform began in the early 1900s; The Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education (1914) and the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917 were the basis of the vocational education movement. Halpern (1985; 1999) argues (as cited in Bassett & Kochhar-Bryant, 2012) it gained more movement in the 1960s "when it became a high priority of the then U.S. Office of Education's Bureau of Adult, Vocational, and Technical Education." The Vocational Act of 1963 was passed along with the Carl D. Perkins Education Act of 1984, which was amended in 2006 to the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006. The Vocational Act of 1963 was to improve upon existing transition programs and to increase funding (Bassett & Kochhar-Bryant, 2012) and the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 "increased focus on the academic achievement of career and technical education students, strengthen the connections between secondary and postsecondary education, and improve state and local accountability" (United States Department of Education, 2017). These laws, in accordance with IDEIA in 2004 (United States Department of Education, 2017), have laid the foundation for transition programs to be a part of the public education system for students with disabilities.

Sonoma County Office of Education in Santa Rosa, California gives a succinct definition of transition programs that have been created and implemented based on legal foundation.

> A Transition Program is designed to "teach work" to special education students, age 18-22, and to support their growth into adulthood. Program

> activities take place in the community – at work sites and other locations – with the goal of helping students acquire the skills to secure and maintain employment after they leave school. The daily living, academic, and domestic skills that are an integral part of working and the adult world are also emphasized.

Many school districts across the country have transition programs for students aged 18–21 with IEPs. In Minnesota, students with a disability can qualify for these programs (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). These transition programs offer training in post-secondary education, independent living, and employment. There are a number of differences between high school and college that transition programs can address: "(a) less contact with instructors, (b) expectations of higher levels of academic capability, (c) fewer tests covering greater amounts of material, (d) changes in the support systems that students had in high school, (e) higher expectations to achieve independently, and (f) changes in social and independent living demands" (Getzel & Webb, 2012). Independent living skills are developed that are needed to maintain home environments and personal lives. They include chores (knowing what to do and when), personal hygiene and grooming, eating properly, planning and preparing meals (proper nutrition), cleaning, organization, and money and time management (Wolffe & Erin, 2012).

In terms of employment, transition programs have varied opportunities depending on the needs and abilities of the students. Existing research from Institute for Community Inclusion Umass Boston (2016) suggests the importance of a holistic approach that builds expectations, investments, and strategies around integrated employment - defined as full

or part-time work at the prevailing wage, and at least minimum wage, with wages and benefits similar to those without disabilities performing the same work, and fully integrated with co-workers without disabilities. ThinkWork is a resource for a multitude of programs related to employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It is through the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

For students entering the competitive job force, Hanley-Maxwell & Izzo (2012) list a set of core skills that are needed for 21st century employment: (a) foundation: life skills, core academic skills, career skills, and information, media, and technology skills; (b) integrative: social skills, self-determination, and personal values; and (c) application: career planning and job search. For students requiring structured work experience, programs need to take stock of existing opportunities and resources, reach out to the community, and build an integrated system of options (Lindstrom, Doren, Flannery, & Benz, 2012). In order for students with disabilities to be prepared for employment, they need to "participate in a range of structured work-experience options that include less intensive experiences (e.g., job shadowing), as well as more extensive longer-term training opportunities (e.g., internships, apprenticeships, postsecondary training)" (Lindstrom et al., 2012). Wolffe (1997) suggests students should also learn skills in self-awareness, job seeking (including applications and interviewing), and job maintenance.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor (1983), "a sheltered workshop is a nonprofit organization primarily engaged in assisting handicapped workers toward achieving their vocational potential through a controlled work environment and

remunerative employment and ordinarily developing individualized goals and providing supportive services." At the time of this publication, there were 5,000 sheltered workshops in the United States and almost all of them had been issued lower minimum wage certificates by the Wage and Hour Division of the Employment Standards Administration, U.S. Department of Labor (United States Department of Labor, 1983). A study completed by Cimera, Wehman, West, & Burgess (2012) found no differences in rate of employment when comparing 215 employees with autism prior to entering supported environment to 215 employees with autism who were not in sheltered workshops. However, in sheltered workshops, they were paid considerably less ($129.36 per week compared to $191.42 per week) and "cost significantly more to serve ($6,065.08 versus $2,440.60) than their non-sheltered workshop peers. Results presented here suggest that individuals with autism achieve better vocational outcomes if they do not participate in sheltered workshops prior to enrolling in supported employment" (Cimera et al. 2012). Given students with autism can qualify for transition programs, and the reported lower income, sheltered workshops may not be the best option for transition programs.

To support employment within transition programs, staff often work jointly with the vocational rehabilitation services (VRS) unit, whose mission is to "enhance the economic success of individuals, businesses, and communities by improving opportunities for prosperity and independence" (Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, 2017). The VRS is an important stakeholder in the transition process because of their knowledge of employment opportunities, their support

in employment, and their relationship with the student and families after graduation from the transition program.

Transition programs are unique training facilities because they are geared more towards individual needs of the students in the program. Employment and income increase independence and an overall sense of self-worth. Some are better than others in overall effectiveness, which begs the questions: What makes transition programs different and effective, specifically in the area of employment? How do these programs train their students to be successful employees and to maintain employment months and years after leaving the training facility? And why should we as a society care about, take an interest in, and invest in the effectiveness of these programs?

To learn more about how a transition program functions, I looked into a transition program that has been successful for its students' transition into adulthood, especially in the area of employment. I interviewed former parents/guardians and current teachers of a transition program that has been running for ten years as a stand-alone program. This district's transition program had a reported employment retention rate of 83 percent in 2016 at student graduation, which is 47.8 percentage points higher than the national average of 35.2 percent in 2015 (the district average included individuals with disabilities aged 21–22 at graduation and the national average included individuals with disabilities aged 16–64) (Erickson, et al., 2016). Because of this high success rate, I wondered what exactly made this program so effective in teaching students employment skills that translate directly into their trades and job retention.

Significance of Study

This study seeks to understand employment and retention rate of employees with disabilities through a social justice lens. Our society tends to determine success through ableism, socio-economic status, and career choice, with highly regarded jobs being ones that offer six-figure salaries and which require a lot of schooling. When we start to value individuals' successes based on their own potential and interest, we will start to view each other differently; we will start to view each other as equals and be proud of who we are as a whole community because individually we use self-determination to reach our personal goals and potential.

Study Contribution

The employment training program at this site has 47.8 percentage points higher job retention rate than the national average of 35.2 percent (Erickson et al., 2016). This study identifies and acknowledges the successes this program enjoys with students with intellectual disabilities in the area of employment retention. It will acknowledge the parental perspective because parents are invaluable members of the team and support system for the student, and they help to identify strengths and areas for improvement. This analysis will also demonstrate ways in which positive strides are being made towards social justice for individuals with disabilities and improvements in quality of life, as well as identifying ways in which the program can make improvements.

Methods

Research Design

For this study, I chose the qualitative approach of a case study. “Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator bounds systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (observations interviews, documents) and reports a case description and themes” (Creswell, 2013). I analyzed the classes available for students to take in the program (documents), observed classes taught in the transition program, and interviewed parents/guardians of the students with disabilities who were previously in the program. The method most heavily utilized were the interviews.

Setting and review of relevant documents. All students who graduated in the program were students previously identified with a disability and were 18–21 years old at the time of their attendance in the transition program. This transition program is in a suburb of a metropolitan area and has been a separate program serving students with disabilities for 10 years. The program started informally in one of the high schools in the district, but formally moved to its own setting and has been consistently growing ever since its inception. It has grown quickly to the point where multiple buildings are being utilized to service students. Because the buildings are on their own site and not in the public school setting, the students and the program are labeled as a Federal Setting Four: Public Separate Day School Facility for Greater than 50% of the school day (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016).

The students currently attending the program have varying disabilities including (but not limited to) autism spectrum disorder, other health disabilities, learning disabilities, developmental cognitive disabilities, and emotional behavior disabilities. Students also have other identified needs in oppositional defiant disorder, attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety, and depression.

The classes provided by the program were all related to an area of transition: employment, independent living, or post-secondary education. There are a total of forty-one classes offered and two large-scale curriculums related to employment. Of the forty-one classes, nine are employment- and job-specific (career explorations, employment math, employment reading, Job Seeking 1, Job Seeking 2, social skills for work and relationships, work-based learning, work seminars, and work readiness). Nine other courses overlap independent living and/or post-secondary education with employment (career and technical center, Financial Literacy 1, Financial Literacy 2, goal-based learning, self-determination, service learning projects, social skills basics, social skills for human relations, and social skills: interpersonal relationships). Two curriculums are used with individuals with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities to increase work readiness. PAES Lab is a job simulation program where students become the employees and teachers become the employers. “PAES provides exploration through hands-on experience providing real and meaningful career information and knowledge of what they can do. It assesses and trains proper work behaviors, eliminating many barriers to successful job placement” (Talent Assessment, n.d.). Students explore jobs while using

real tools which assess their competitive work potential and interest level. The job areas include computer technology, construction/industrial, processing/production, consumer/service, and business marketing. Project Discovery is another curriculum that was implemented. It is “research-based and field tested in lots of classroom settings with students of all ability levels, even those who are severely challenged” (Education Associates, n.d.). It is a curriculum that has career education courses to increase basic job skills and raise awareness and interest in career fields that may not otherwise have been experienced. Based on student population (cognitive development) and student interest, a kit is chosen for a class. Project Discovery is the main curriculum where one kit is used per trimester along with supplemental material from other curriculums to form a comprehensive unit put together by teachers.

There are two work coordinators in the program: one who works with volunteer and/or non-paid work experiences, and one who works with competitive, paid experiences. In their later years in the program, students have the opportunity to work for high school credits when a training agreement is signed between the company and the student. This training agreement allows the school to assist with any areas of concern and to help the student advocate appropriately for themselves. This type of work experience allows students to work with the employers to meet the needs of the company as well as teaching the students real and applicable expectations in order to keep and maintain employment. These employment opportunities with the support of job coaches, work coordinators, and training agreements are in place to give experience to students, help them maintain employment, and to provide them opportunities to learn how to work

through different experiences and get into higher positions of employment. Their work opportunities are not considered sheltered workshops because they pay at least minimum wage (for the competitive paid positions) and all of the individuals in the job setting do not have an identified disability.

The work coordinators work jointly with VRS representatives to schedule times with the students in the program. During these meetings (approximately twice per month) their individual needs are discussed regarding employment. This could include applying for jobs, transportation to the interview, interview practice, clothes for the interview and for the job if they are hired, and transportation through government supported systems (e.g., Transit Link). VRS in this program functions as an extra resource that the students have rights and access to for employment specifically.

Observations. Observations were conducted in special education classroom settings (two other classrooms along with my own) within the first two months of the academic year in the areas of transition: independent living, employment, and postsecondary education. Observations in the other two classrooms were of students with mild disabilities (other health disability, autism, attention deficit disorder, learning disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder for the higher level classes (not PAES or Project Discovery)). Curricula were used and pieced together by special education teachers to meet the needs of the student population in the classroom. The classes taught and observed were Project Discovery (intermediate/advanced), career exploration, and job seeking. Class sizes varied from five to nine students and varied from individualized education where students were

independently working at their level to whole group instruction with independent work time supported by teacher and paraprofessional assistance.

I implemented the research-based PAES and Project Discovery curriculums to students with moderate cognitive disabilities (developmental cognitive disability) in special education classes. I also implemented classes for students with mild disabilities with curriculums related to employment (reading and finance) and independent living. My class sizes varied from five to ten students with independent job tasks to whole group instruction with teacher and paraprofessional support during individual work time.

Sample and Interviews. Interviews of parents/guardians were the primary mode for collecting narratives (see Appendices A and B for consent form and interview questions for parent/guardians). Parents/guardians of students who graduated two months to fourteen months prior to interview dates were contacted via phone through permission of the special education coordinator who supervises the transition program. Seven families (eight parents/guardians) consented of thirty-five graduates in the last two years. Interviews were between 42 minutes to 1 hour, 48 minutes. Two of the interviews were held via telephone during which I took comprehensive notes. The recorded interviews were transcribed.

Participants

In this research study, the participants included eight consenting parents/guardians of students who graduated this previous school year (two months after graduation) to one year and two months past their graduation date from the transition program. All consented to interviews about their experiences of being a part of the transition program.

Six of the eight parent interviews (one set of two parents/guardians) were held in person using an audio recording device. Two parents/guardians were not able to meet in person and completed telephone interviews while comprehensive notes were taken during the phone calls. Of the parent interviews, the five individual interviews were with a female parent/guardian, one interview was with a male parent/guardian, and one set of two parents/guardians were female and male. The parents/guardians all lived within the boundaries of the district, which is a suburb of a metropolitan area. Each of the participants has been assigned a pseudonym in the findings section. All of the parents/guardians of the students had their student attend the transition program with an identified disability in one or more of the following areas: autism spectrum disorder, developmental cognitive disability, specific learning disability, emotional/behavioral disability, other health disability, physical impairment, and/or speech and language disability. Their individual disabilities, family backgrounds, and personal circumstances are not disclosed due to the small pool of individuals eligible for this study and the even smaller pool of individuals who consented to be interviewed. To help maintain confidentiality, any identifiable information has not been reported in this study.

Trustworthiness

Member checking, triangulation, reflexive journaling, and dependability were methods used to increase trustworthiness of this study. Member checking is a way to cross check my qualitative work (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). For my form of member checking, I repeated back to the parent/guardian during the interview, what my understanding was of their message. They would confirm or correct my summary and paraphrasing of their

message. Triangulation is the use of multiple methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) to verify my findings. It is a form of demonstrating dependability and reliability. I used my observations, interviews, course analysis, and personal experiences of working in the program for triangulation. What I observed in the classrooms, heard from parents/guardians in the interviews, read about in the course descriptions, and what I teach on a daily basis were confirmed to be related through analysis and comparisons of each. The observations, interviews, course analysis, and curriculum implementation were all "overlapping methods" (Morse, 2015). I brought these findings to my advisor and my special education supervisor for confirmation. Reflexivity is how "researchers position themselves in a qualitative study. This means that researchers convey their background, how it informs their interpretation of the information in a study, and what they have to gain from the study" (Creswell, 2013). For my own reflexivity, I acknowledged my own biases and subjective experiences and how they influenced the study. This is based on my previous work experience as a special education teacher and on my strong desire and passion to increase independence and employment retention of people with disabilities. From this study, I hope to gain insight into how parents feel about this specific transition programs' offerings, more specifically the positives and the areas of improvement.

Another aspect of my personal interjections (for reflexivity) was during the interview process. My voice and level of excitement revealed my reaction to positive experiences as well as my empathy for experiences that were not as positive while conversing with parents/guardians. After each interview, I processed the findings verbally to myself (thinking out loud) and through journaling to identify areas where my biases,

opinions, experiences, and views were brought into the dialogue which was part of my reflexive journaling.

Limitations

"The limitations of a study are those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the interpretation of the findings from your research. They are the constraints on generalizability, applications to practice, and/or utility of findings that are the result of the ways in which you initially chose to design the study and/or the method used to establish internal and external validity" (Price & Murnan, 2004). The limitations of my study include the small number of participants, not including the students who participated in the transition program, and only including two sets of graduation years. Thirty-five individuals graduated in the past two academic years and only seven families responded after three attempts per family contact. Students were originally considered for the study, but with a lack of response from parents/guardians and the wide range of severity of disability, the number of students who were able to communicate their personal experience would have been minimal. Teachers were informally interviewed, but the program had many new staff who would not have provided adequate information for this study. This study only covers two of the ten years the program has produced graduates. Time was also a limitation in compiling data from the graduates of this program. Personal subjectivity to the topic and program was noted in my reflexive journaling throughout the interviews, which enabled me to connect with the parents/guardians on a personal level; however, with my known position as a special

education teacher in the district in which I was doing research, this may have impacted some of the responses I received.

Data Analysis

"Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion" (Creswell, 2013). My audio recorded interviews were transcribed and my interviews via phone had extensive notes that were written during the phone call. I analyzed the interview transcriptions two separate times. During the first analysis, I created codes and analytic memos to make assertions from the transcriptions about the program successfully teaching employment skills and implementing those skills in real jobs with job coaches. From these assertions, I analyzed the transcripts a second time to corroborate my common themes found from the analytic memos. I noted specific words, phrases, and overall meanings of responses as *broad negative* or *broad positive* to the topics of community resources, career, opportunities, communication, employment, and programming. I represented my findings into three areas: teacher compliments, program positives, and areas of improvement. Figure 1 (p. 40) in my introduction visually represents my findings.

Findings

The transition program focuses on employment, independent living, and post-secondary education. The interview questions focused mainly on the area of employment, but responses from the parents/guardians involved all three transition areas. Each family

had a different set of experiences going through the program based on numerous factors (disability area, individual goals and capabilities, number of years in the program, etc.), but commonalities were found in teacher effectiveness and involvement, program positives, and areas for improvement. Though the questions were open ended, were mainly directed at the experiences from the program, and specifically related to employment, self-advocacy did not come up in the findings. Advocacy from the teachers was noted as a finding from the data analysis, but not self-advocacy, which can be a major part of a transition program (historically speaking).

Findings include: (a) teacher care, advocacy, and emphasizing success, (b) program positives, specifically the employment variety and the skills learned at those jobs and recommendation of the program to upcoming students and parents/guardians based on their employment experiences, support and advocacy from teachers, and genuine care from the teachers and staff from the program, and (c) areas of improvement including more variety and quantity of employment opportunities and communication about information regarding government resources and programming.

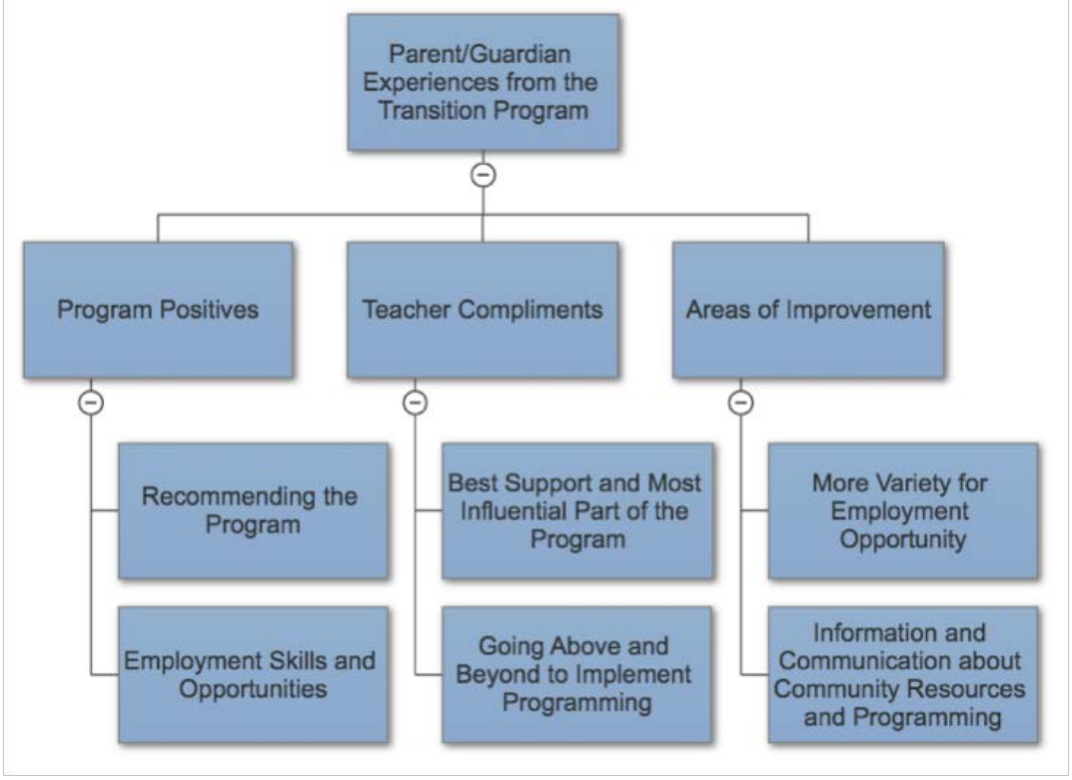

Figure 1: *Parent/Guardian Experiences with the Transition Program. A taxonomic diagram representing the commonalities from parent/guardian interviews with subcategories supporting the commonalities.*

Teacher Care, Advocacy, and Emphasis on Success

Throughout the interview process, questions were open ended to prompt organic responses related to the parents'/guardians' overall feelings and effectiveness of the program (strengths, weaknesses, most influential parts, transitioning to adulthood after the program, and program recommendation). The questions did not lean toward teacher involvement or even mention the word "teacher," yet all of the parents/guardians praised the teachers and/or case managers of their student (a case manager is a teacher in the program who is the point of contact and facilitates meetings with members of the

student's IEP team to plan and implement their educational programming). The two key findings here are: (a) teachers are one of the main reasons why this program is successful (through genuine care about the parents/guardians' student, advocating for the student and family, and emphasizing their success (when students and parents/guardians felt the genuine care and "family-like" environment, it instilled confidence in the student which influenced their success and (b) the parents/guardians recommend the program to other people because of the accommodations that were provided by the teachers and volunteering to be the service provider to their student when services at the home could have been provided by any special education teacher in the district.

The best supports and most influential parts of the program are the teachers. Parents/guardians expressed that the teachers and staff in the program genuinely cared for their students and wanted them to be successful in the program and to continue to be successful in their lives after graduation.

When asked about any final comments about the program (specifically the biggest positive or drawback), Mary[1] responded

> It is a fabulous program and... the teachers really, really care about the students and they are really wanting the kids to succeed. They really...are genuinely really wonderful teachers. He has come such a long way and he felt so good about going to school and going...and he felt really good about going to school. He really did. They made him feel like he was successful. Our case manager has come to our defense so many times...and that's why I say it's like a family. I felt like it was

[1] Pseudonyms are used for all participants in this study.

being in a family at this program and they had our best interest as a family and for my son.

Heather's response to the question "What were the best supports and most influential parts of the program?" was

> Most of the teachers. The teachers were really good. They let us know things and how to do them and how to comprehend stuff that we were working with. We never knew anything and they helped us know about the program.

Tasha was also asked about the best supports and most influential parts of the program

> I would say best supports is the staff. They really connect with all of the students. At graduation, I think pretty much all of them were crying. You could really feel the connection between them; they were more than just students. They really cared for all of our kids.

Through a dialogue response to the question "Would you recommend the program to students and families?" Chelsea responded

> I think that we had some really great teachers and really great case managers and we are very fortunate to live in a district that values these students. The case managers certainly cared and they cared about my son and his success. They care very much and it is very obvious.

Jamie expressed her satisfaction at the willingness of staff and teachers to find out the answers to questions and to work with what her daughter wanted, when she was asked about information being provided to her by the school

> Everyone was really good about talking to us about things. “I know there is a guy…just call so-n-so about getting help,” and they really did. They talked to us about things, and then at [the transition program] they would work individually with her on what her idea of working and living was and not them telling her what to do. It was all her ideas.

Lauren’s response with regard to the best or most influential supports of the program was

> The teacher and or case manager. He was actually with our son his whole high school career as a special education teacher. Then he moved to the program for his first year. He was a great advocate for not only our son but for all the kids. He really spoke up and stood up for him and really advocated for their well-being and for their success.

Parents were making the connection between the importance of teacher involvement, genuine interest and care in their student and their students’ individual success and enjoyment in the program. They not only cared about their education and success in life, they took time after school to make sure their education was provided with integrity by the teachers who were trained to deliver the curriculum. This leads us into the homebound services that two of the six parents/guardians discussed happened to their students.

Going above and beyond to implement programming through accommodations and volunteering. Students in the program may have medical needs that prevent them from physically attending school during the day. Districts are required to provide homebound education to the students if their medical condition prevents them from attending school; however, the teacher can be any licensed special education teacher and she/he does not have to be someone from the program. Parents/guardians were appreciative of teachers from the program volunteering to provide the education to their students.

Mary continued her praise of teachers in her final comments about the program:

> In my experience...my son had open heart surgery...do you know that his teacher came to our home and did work with him until he was strong enough to go to school? After her long day at school, she comes out to our house for an hour or two hours to work with him? I mean, come on!

Alex mentioned his son needed homebound education services:

> So once he started to get into December, what they did is they did a home school for him. For weeks we had a teacher come on out. She was really nice and does great work with him. She'd come on out twice a week for two and a half hours a time working on certification things (directly related to his IEP goals). She did that for November and December.

Even though the students are entitled to these services and the district will provide services, the special education teachers volunteered to be the educators to deliver the curriculum. It could have been any special education teacher in the district or any

licensed special education teacher in the state, yet in both instances they were teachers from the program.

Program Positives

Four questions prompted dialogue of personal experiences from parents/guardians concerning students' time in the program. One question asked about the best supports and the most influential parts of the program, specifically related to employment (through prompting if the parent did not mention an employment aspect); however, through natural dialogue, program positives were mentioned organically throughout the entire interview. The program positives described were employment skills and opportunities (specifically the variety and the skills learned at those jobs) and recommendation of the program to upcoming students and parents/guardians based on their employment experiences, support and advocacy from teachers, and genuine care from the teachers and staff from the program.

Employment skills and opportunities. Overall, parents/guardians were pleased with the skills their students learned relating to employment and the employment opportunities they were given while in the program.

Jamie's response to the best supports and most influential parts of the program was related to employment and independent living:

> They built her confidence up, helped her get her first job that wasn't dog sitting. The best was she was learning practical job skills that wasn't from a book. I just liked how they worked with each individual and they weren't clumped together.

Heather liked the employment opportunities for her student:

> [The ski resort] was a wonderful place to work; he was a food runner. When he was 21, he could bring drinks out. He also liked the senior center coffee shop; he did everything there. He would have interest in being in a coffee shop but the local grocery store has more opportunities for him.

Tasha felt the employment skills and opportunities in the community were formative for her student:

> Definitely the job that, well, two jobs in particular. The state fair and [the ski resort]. She worked in the dairy building for two years, and then she worked in the grandstand last year. She's actually looking forward to doing it. And the job out at [the ski resort] was just remarkable for her. She's running the deep fryer. I'm just like, "What?" So I mean like really, really, really impactful were the ones at state fair and [the ski resort]. They had to go through an interview process. The transition program helped prep them for the interview. Even for the state fair, they interview every year. That's been very helpful. It is good to talk about what does make you a good employee. Highlighting their positives and their strengths. I am like, "Can *I* have that class?"

Chelsea felt the most influential part of the program was the job coaching aspect during her student's employment:

> I think the job coach was a very good part of it. I think that he had a group setting in a job setting started laying the groundwork for employment. He was given an internship at [a store] and to work at [a restaurant] and then he

> was given a paid opportunity to work at the state fair to work there for a week. They sorted and recycled things. He had a couple paid, a couple volunteer. He cleaned at the church too. The valuable parts was learning what worked and what didn't.

Employment opportunities at the transition program varied from volunteer to paid, and unsupervised to supervised. Each student had different needs that were met throughout the program to ultimately teach the students the skills to interview, perform the job, and keep the job. These are skills that the students will have for the rest of their lives, which provides them independence, a sense of well-being, and having a purpose. Each parent had different reasons for recommending the program, but overall their experiences were positive and students were learning lifelong skills.

Recommending the program to incoming students and families. Seven of the eight parents/guardians recommended the program to students who were eligible. Some parents/guardians even went as far to say it would be beneficial for students who did not qualify, because their experience had been that valuable. The eighth parent/guardian had a different opportunity arise that was more suited for their student.

When asked about recommending the transition program to other families, Heather responded:

> Most definitely I would recommend the program to everyone. They need to know what is on the other side of high school. Once they are out of high school, they don't realize what is out there for them. It is still something they have to do – it is a transition. I think it should be for everyone regardless of if you have a disability.

Jamie agreed with recommending the program to other families, especially with her background in schools:

> Yes, obviously to anyone who ever asks, even out of state. I work with charter schools in Michigan 18-26 for transition, varying skill levels...life skills. Sometimes getting them out of the house is the most important thing because just sitting at home can cause depression.

Mary also strongly recommended the program to students:

> Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. Because the thing about that too, Ashley, what I loved about the program...if you had a question about something and they didn't know the answer, they would get back to you and tell you who is the resource for this. So they are a great resource as far as anything regarding anything you needed to do for the transition into this program, and from high school into the program, or in preparation or transition into adulthood.

Alex had a unique experience with the program, not as typical as that of many families going through the program. He had both positives and areas for improvement for the program, but when asked about recommending the program to others through dialogue, he also replied:

> By and large, when you compare from around the state districts, this district is ahead of the curb in a lot of ways. The best thing, knowing everything I did, if you go through everything the same again, I would repeat it.

When Tasha was asked about recommending the program, she responded, "Yes...for mainly...for the job that especially she had last year, the implementing part."

Chelsea recommended the program for the maturing process for her student:

> I would. I think it was a really good step. He was not ready to be employed. Our goal was to have him employed three months after high school and he started working at [a restaurant] in November and was fired after six shifts. We learned he needs jobs with less speed, more freedom, input into how things go. He wouldn't have been ready for that (his current job bagging groceries) without his experiences at the transition program. I think it was really good and so again where he is now...because of just who he is...he needed the additional time with people and opportunity to grow up.

Areas for Improvement

Despite their praise, all of the parents/guardians identified areas for improvement for the program. Because the transition program is individualized for each student, each parent/guardian suggested unique ways for improving the program. Based on the responses, I assert the most common areas for improvement are to add more employment opportunities for the students (quantity and variety) and to increase communication about community resources and programming.

More variety of employment opportunity. While one of the program positives reported from the parents/guardians was employment opportunity and job skills, the parents want *more* options for students to choose from and to explore (current work experiences and volunteer opportunities include restaurant bussing, setting up tables, chairs, and pamphlets for events at churches, retail, and washing and cleaning dishes; students can independently apply for and work during the school day with a training

agreement but these are student led job opportunities compared to school led opportunities). Their experiences in the jobs were valuable enough to say it was one of the most positive parts of the program and to continue searching for more job opportunities, variety, and increase connections for the students.

Chelsea described wanting more career exploration and observation:

> Just more exploration of the students' possibilities. [The program] is tied to putting them into a job scenario and see how it goes. You have to put them into a job site and see how it goes for exploration. Opportunities for more exploration are needed...job shadowing and just watching people and learning what they do...to see if it's something they might like.

Lauren would like more opportunities in other cities in the surrounding area. Considering many of the students who graduate will likely apply at those same places, she would like more places for job experience to increase potential employment after graduation:

> I would encourage them more to find some places that are, um… even… most of them are kind of local in this city...I think they should kind of branch out to neighboring cities. I think they do at the assisted living facility...there's only so many kids that can go to the same site and expect a job. If you have 15 kids going to the same site, you know chances aren't very good to getting a job there. So if they could open up more community where then there are more opportunities for maybe getting a job afterwards.

Tasha did not feel all the job experiences her daughter had experienced were particularly enjoyable. She would have liked to see more places accepting students and making sure the experiences were positive for each student:

> I think they should be a little more selective. Like I said, our one experience was not a positive one. Not that it was a negative one, but it just, there wasn't any benefits. Maybe for other students, that was something that was more challenging for them, it just wasn't a good fit for her. It's not just about "getting"; I want the experiences to be positive, not just an experience. Not that every single job that they're ever going to have is to going to be "woo, fun," whatever, but when they're first getting their toes in the water and you want to encourage them, I just feel everything needs to be positive.

Mary felt the career inventory (a tool to help students determine specific interests, skills, and values that fit into occupations) would be a beneficial thing to do to help students identify what they like and where their strengths lie, and then to secure jobs for them in the fields they want compared to just the jobs that were available through the connections they currently have:

> [The transition program] is doing a lot in the community and every year they have found more community that is willing to help and work with the kids. I wish there was more who would do that test that I just told you about [career inventory] with their interests in and their trades. And see if, you know...see if they can go to school and see what kind of trades that they can get to, and that would secure

them like a job once they graduated from high school. That is what...something like that.

Information and communication about community resources and programming. Four out of the eight parents/guardians revealed they wanted to learn more about community resources and the educational program in the transition program. Community resources include, but are not limited to: social security, Medicaid, VRS, guardianship, assisted living, foster homes, professional care attendant (PCA), etc. One parent knew a lot about community resources but felt it was still extremely valuable to talk about the subject. These answers were evident when asked about their overall experience in the program and when asked the question directly related to community resources.

Heather felt they did not say enough about community resources and information in general, when asked about her overall experience in the program:

> The one thing about it, when they went to next step they should say more about this, they should do more to educate parents/guardians about the programs that are available. This meeting you need to attend, this is for SSI, this is for "so and so," this is really what you need to focus on. I brought an extra set of hands to listen because there is so much information and you will not remember everything that is said. That was a two-and-a-half to three-hour meeting. That was one of our main things and get people to go to those meetings and informational sessions.

To continue with the topic of community resources, she was directly asked whether the program provided enough. Heather responded, "A little bit but not a lot, no

government representatives or pamphlets at IEP meeting or throughout the program."

> Lauren felt similar about the school's provision of community resources:
>
> Um...on the IEP there was always a statement saying at the age of 18 he will be on his own, but other than that they didn't really help us… and how to get guardianship...and how to get SSI...that was all kind of us parents/guardians. Somebody that might have gone through it had helped us or word of mouth.

Tasha simply stated she did not receive extra information: "No, the program did not give us any resources related to any of those [Easter Seals, vocational rehab services, social security, etc.]."

Chelsea thought the lack of information received about outside resources was the biggest flaw:

> Absolutely not; that would be my biggest complaint as a parent. There are no initiatives in place. I felt like it was all on my shoulders. It's like funding, waivers. Who should be on the waivers (referring to a Medicaid benefit? How does vocational rehab work? I didn't even realize it was a service until a year into next step. I kept wondering if I missed something or a meeting. But they need to bring in experts to talk to us about everything. Don't assume the parents/guardians know information (connection of services). It's almost like there needs to be a liaison for the county to next step...like a social worker to link the student and parents/guardians to all the benefits...not just links. Being a resource and training...actual trainings about those things.

Staff assumed Alex knew about government and outside resources. Indeed, it was true that he knew about many programs. However, Alex felt that it should be addressed in transition and that it is extremely important:

> We didn't, but I knew a lot of it, so I think a lot of it was, there's an assumption made, maybe, that I don't need it. I'm assuming other parents/guardians were provided a lot of that stuff. You're supposed to be getting it as you transition. The age of transition, age of majority. What I would just say is, from my perspective, make sure it's being done. And this is where it helps on the website, resources for parents/guardians, which is real good. Just to get some background information. Some parents/guardians never heard of PACER. They've never heard of a lot of these different programs, organizations out there that can help, or what Nanny is. Gosh, you need to know what these organizations are. So, to get that word out.

Conclusions

Based on the experiences of these parents/guardians, the data suggests the transition program is proving successful in teaching employment skills to individuals with disabilities in order to obtain and maintain employment. An emerging theme from the findings is what the program is geared to do compared to what parents/guardians would like from the program (community resources, including but not limited to information on social security, legal guardianship, health insurance, independent/assisted living, personal care assistance, and more diverse job placements). Many of the parents feel communication could be improved and there could be increased and more varied employment opportunities. VRS is an extremely important stakeholder in the transition program and can be a service to address the concerns voiced by parents. In order for VRS to be a successful team participant, they could be more involved with the program and understood by staff in the transition program. A study completed by Benz, Johnson, Mikkelson, and Lindstrom (1995) identified barriers in their own study between schools and VRS that need to be addressed in order to improve collaboration:

> (a) identify and train a few key people from whom parents and students could receive consistent and accurate information about the VRS and transition process, (b) train students and parents to be more effective advocates, and (c) establish peer support groups/networking opportunities that allow students and parents to obtain relevant information, explore options, and discuss strategies related to the transition process with other students and parents.

The findings from my study run parallel with Benz et. al.'s (1995) findings is that there is a need to improve communication of services as well as develop partnerships between employers in the community and the transition program. I would implement the suggestions from Benz et. al. (1995) along with my suggestions of (a) having tangible copies of frequently asked questions and answers from parents, guardians, and students readily available at IEP meetings; (b) a VRS representative at every IEP meeting and, if this is not possible, having information that the representative would like to provide based on the individual's' needs; (c) a website with transitional guidelines to adulthood that parents/guardians and students should complete during their time with the transition program; (d) a representative from the transition program working within the community and surrounding communities to build relationships for future job placements; and (e) educating companies and employers about the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities.

Epstein (2010) describes six types of involvement and sample practices in her framework. The sixth type of involvement is collaborating with the community. Sample practices where the program could improve may include information for students and family on community health, cultural, recreational, societal support and other programs or services. Through this, Epstein's (2010) expected results would include: (a) increased skills and talents through enriched curricular and extracurricular experiences; (b) awareness of careers and of options for future education and work; (c) specific benefits linked to programs, services, resources, and opportunities that connect students with the community; (d) knowledge and use of local resources by family and child to increase

skills and talents or to obtain needed services; and (e) interactions with other families in community activities. All of Epstein's (2010) expected results touch on the findings of my research in the areas that parents/guardians would like from the program.

Because the teacher care, advocacy, and support system was strongly noted from the parents, I would also suggest continuing the assurance of this piece of the program through the hiring process and the ongoing philosophy, culture, and climate that prioritizes care, advocacy, and support of the student and parents/guardians in the program.

Implications. The meanings I constructed from my data have helped me better understand the parent/guardian experiences of transition programs. As a special education teacher in the transition program, these findings provide direction for improvements in communication (with government representatives and parents/guardians), building relationships with employers and companies within the community, and continuing to be a "work-parent" to students in the program to provide care, support, and advocating for them.

Overall, an important aspect of the findings is understanding and appreciating the success stories that have arisen from the narratives; however, it is equally important that we identify the barriers parents/guardians experience and that we remedy these issues in order to reduce discrimination against individuals with disabilities. As we continue to have conversations on improving transition services for individuals with disabilities and connecting more with communities and employers, we increase independence and the employment rates of individuals with disabilities and begin making strides towards social

equality. Ableism and othering will be challenged through inclusion and opportunities to appreciate people for who they are and what they can contribute, rather than seeing them as disabled individuals who do not contribute to society. The people with disabilities who participate fully in this transition program are given more access to more fulfilling work experiences and careers which can increase their overall self-worth and increased positive perception from the community.

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Appendix A - Consent Form

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CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a study designed to better understand vocational training programs, focusing on the area of employment. Specifically, the study will address your personal experiences with the vocational training program that your student was a part of as well as a follow up study of where your student is currently in the area of employment. The district where your student attended a vocational training program would also like to gather information regarding information about your student's current status in all three areas of transition: post-secondary education and training, employment, and independent living (including recreation and leisure, community participation, home living, and related service).

This study is being directed by Dr. Peter Demerath, Associate Professor in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development. It is being conducted by Ashley Horton, a student enrolled in the Master of Arts program under the department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development. The study is for her thesis which is the final component of her Master of Arts program. Dr. Demerath is Ashley's advisor for her Master's program.

Study Purpose

The purpose of the study is to explore the strengths, benefits, weaknesses, and next steps of the vocational training program that your student has previously participated in. Specifically, this research explores the employment aspect of the vocational training with specific training, curriculum, job experiences, and roles/responsibilities of students who have been out of the program for at least one year. The additional follow up information in all areas of transition (post-secondary education and training, employment, and independent living) will be used by the vocational training program's district for data purposes. The follow up information for the district will also be reported in the study (confidentially in the study but shared separately with the district with personal information).

Study Procedures

This study is completely voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect you in any adverse way. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an audio recorded interview about your experiences as a parent in the vocational training program.
- Participate in an audio recorded interview about your student's current employment, independent living, and post-secondary education and training status.

Risks of Study Participation

This study involves some risk to you. Potential risks of participating in this study include: discussing some possible negative experiences you may have had and reliving them, and possibly being identified based on your responses by others who have involvement in the vocational training program, given the small number of students, employees, and parents involved and affiliated with this specific vocational training program site. All names will be changed and no identifying information will be used in the study.

The information that you share separately in the follow-up questionnaire for the district where your student completed the vocational training program will include the information you disclose (example: if you include your name in the survey, the district will have your name on file).

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.

Benefits of Study Participation
There are no direct benefits to you based on your participation. Your participation may influence the future work and goals of the vocational training program as well as contribute to a growing body of narratives and research about individuals with disabilities and employment. Your participation may also influence the district where your student completed the vocational training program based on your responses about your experiences during the training and your responses about your student's current employment, independent living, and post-secondary education and training status.

Confidentiality
For the study, all efforts will be made to keep your identity confidential, but given the small number of individuals involved with the vocational training program, assumptions may be made about the identities of participants. The records of this study will be kept private. Your record will be maintained in an anonymous form. The vocational training program will receive general feedback based on the responses of all participants, but no information on your specific responses (the final thesis project). Research records will be destroyed shortly at the conclusion of the fall semester (December, 2017).

The responses to the questions in the follow up study will be shared with the district where your student completed the vocational training program. If there are items you do not wish to share with the district, let the researcher know or do not disclose the information.

Voluntary Nature of the Study
Participation in this study and follow up questionnaire is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with the vocational training program. If you decide to participate, you are also free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. You can withdraw by contacting Ashley Horton or Dr. Peter Demerath.

Contacts and Questions
The primary researcher in this study is Dr. Peter Demerath (advisor to and overseeing Ashley Horton). Ashley Horton is the primary conductor of this research. You may ask any questions you have now, or if you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at 612-626-0768 or at pwd@umn.edu. You may also contact Ashley Horton at 715-529-0250 or hort0110@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St SE, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

Please keep a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information, and I wish to be a part of this study.
If you agree with the terms of this study, please keep a copy of this form.

Signature:_____ Date: _____
Participant Signature

Signature:_____ Date: _____
Ashley Horton

Signature:_____ Date:_____
Dr. Peter Demerath

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Driven to Discover℠

Appendix B - Parent/Guardian Interview Questions

1. What has it been like to have your student at (transition program)?
2. How was your overall experience with Next Step?
3. What were the best supports and most influential parts of the program?
4. What are some areas Next Step could have provided to you and your child in the area of employment?
5. Do you know anything about the WIOA (Work Initiative Opportunity Act); Olmstead Plan?
6. Do you feel you were provided with enough community resources to help with your students' transition to adulthood (social security, Easter seals, DVR, mental health centers, medical care/hospitals/clinics, legal guardianship, advocacy services)?
7. Would you recommend the Next Step program to students/families?
8. Were there areas that Next Step could improve on?